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Editorial: Investigating Black Activism in the Civil War Era

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Editorial

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This special thematic issue of the *Civil War Book Review* is dedicated to recent works that uncover, reveal, and recast the history of Black Americans' emancipation activism in the Civil War Era. The concept of emancipation carried myriad meanings among nineteenth-century Black Americans, which the scholarship reviewed below reflects. These authors have catalogued nineteenth-century Black Americans' vibrant and dynamic efforts to emancipate themselves from slavery, to achieve citizenship and its attendant rights, to secure personal safety, to gain social standing, and to attain economic stability. These books emphasize nineteenth-century African Americans possessed a complex political consciousness that was finely tuned to local, state, and national political developments and white efforts to limit their rights. Their political consciousness inspired their long-standing determination to gain what they knew was deservedly theirs—as Americans, as humans—without waiting for a white savior.

The authors examine Black Americans' diversity of goals and the various means they used to achieve them. However, as most people of African descent in the United States before the Civil War were enslaved, the most fundamental and common form of Black freedom fighting in the antebellum era was emancipation from enslavement. In her review of *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad*, Kate Clifford Larson praises editor Timothy Walker and the chapters' authors for challenging the "20th century fakelore featuring the use of quilt codes, lawn jockeys and other physical devices as signs and signals." What their collection shows is "that escape by water, through a vast network of maritime links, was far more common," as escapees often hid in plain sight, posing as dockworkers, and seamen, on their way to freedom. Larson is confident there is more to be learned: "This volume just whets the appetite for more," she concludes.

Black Americans who escaped bondage as well as those born to freedom knew the attainment and preservation of their own rights were inextricably bound to the eradication of the institution of slavery. As Jennifer Harbour demonstrates in *Organizing Freedom: Black*

Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest, Black people, especially Black women, in Indiana and Illinois welcomed refugees from slavery into their community and soon incorporated them into their activist networks. Gayle T. Tate writes that “Harbour provides us with a finely tuned multilayered exploration of black women’s activism in the antebellum and Civil War eras.” Tate emphasizes how Harbour shows that, for Black Midwesterners, the secular was the sacred as they viewed their efforts at emancipation through a Christian lens. Fighting slavery was fighting sin, and was therefore a religious imperative, as well as humanistic, and pragmatic.

Fighting in the Civil War was one way to directly fight the sin of slavery while also fighting for Black peoples’ citizenship rights. Brian Taylor, however, reveals that African Americans were often ambivalent about soldiering as a means to achieve emancipation in his book, *Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War*. By analyzing the writings of a broad swath of the northern Black population, Taylor shows that many Black people doubted enlistment would lead to citizenship rights while others unfailingly supported Black enlistment as a means to their rights. The debates such ambivalence bore out affected Black enlistment as well as for what and how Black veterans and their allies agitated during and after the war. In his review, Jonathan Lande writes “Taylor’s *Fighting for Citizenship* hits its mark.” Beyond that succinct assessment, Lande offers readers a historiographical overview of literature about the relationship between Black soldiering and activism dating back to 1855 and up to the Vietnam War.

Deborah Willis’s *The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship* presents a “phono-visual” depiction of Black soldiering in the Civil War, reviewer Maurice Wallace writes in his assessment of the most recent of Willis’s many photographic investigations of African American life. By combining soldiers’ own words with their images and other ephemera, Willis is able to give voice and depth to otherwise two-dimensional images. In the process, Willis creates what Wallace writes is “the handsomest picture book,” as well as an “elegantly hybrid” and nuanced portrayal of the Black Civil War soldier’s experience—“he was figured as property as often as he was a person . . . he was a martyr and a deserter, an enlisted man, and rarely an officer.”

Indeed, Black Civil War soldiers’ desertion, death, and discharge are detailed in manuscripts recently acquired by LSU’s special collections housed in Hill Memorial Library, which Melissa Smith shares in her feature essay. The 25th United States Colored Infantry

Regiment, Company H Descriptive Book provides specifics details about Black soldiers' experiences and personal traits, going so far as to describe their complexion—a not uncommon feature in historical documents from Louisiana, a state with a history of racial diversity. This source could provide researchers insight into how colorism might have affected non-white soldiers' experiences in the Civil War as the Company travelled and recruited new members from its starting point in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to its engagements in Louisiana and Florida. Smith also touts the newly acquired muster rolls for the First Louisiana Colored Troops, or the *Corps d'Afrique*, which was part of the Louisiana Native Guard Infantry, “the oldest African American Union regiment to form in Louisiana.” The roll lists the names of soldiers, deserters, deaths, and pay. Smith is confident the muster roll “offers enough information about someone from the Corps d'Afrique that it opens the door to research within census counts and city directories.” These are deep mines of information waiting to be plumbed by historians and genealogical researchers alike.

Ludger Boguille, secretary of New Orleans' Economy Hall, and primary subject of Fatima Shaik's *Economy Hall: The Hidden History of a Free Black Brotherhood* served in Louisiana's Native Guard. In her foray into nonfiction, novelist Shaik uses Boguille to examine how elite Black New Orleanians pursued racial uplift through their fraternal organization, Société d'Economie et d'Assistance Mutuelle (Economy and Mutual Aid Association), and how their views on race, class, and the intersection thereof changed over the course of the Civil War Era. Reviewer Ariane Liazos writes that, while Shaik eschews some conventions of academic histories, such as historiographical debate, she stays faithful to her primary documents, ledgers from Economy Hall's long history, which her “father rescued . . . from the back of a pickup truck” in the 1950s. What Shaik does best, Liazos concludes, “is the recovery of much of this once hidden history.”

Black Americans created and fostered similar fraternal, self-help organizations wherever a free Black population could support them, including in Indiana and Illinois. In my interview with Jennifer Harbour, we discuss how such fraternal organizations were but one facet of Black Midwesterners' efforts to combat geographically-specific limits on their liberties, which she details in her book *Organizing Freedom*. Beyond fraternal organizations, Black Midwesterners channeled their righteous indignation and activist energies through institutions and networks, including Colored Conventions, schools, church auxiliaries, circuit riders, and newspapers to

challenge Black Codes. Once the Civil War broke out, these institutions became regiments of figurative soldiering, led by Black women.

John Garrison Marks's *Black Freedom in the Age of Slavery: Race, Status, and Identity in the Urban Americas* looks at Free Black populations in Charleston, South Carolina and Cartagena, Colombia. What Marks found was that when Black people attempted to better their lives, they challenged extant racialized practices and the ideology of white supremacy that dominated both locales. Still, white leaders in both cities approached Black freedom in distinct ways. Reviewer Takkara Brunson believes Marks's work opens the door for further exploration, which she writes is a testament "to the successes of Marks's comparative approach for examining local histories of race and slavery."

Elana K. Abbott explores how location mattered for Black Americans' aspirations for emancipation in *Beacons of Liberty: International Free Soil and the Fight for Racial Justice in Antebellum America*. In what reviewer Kate Rivington believes is "one of the most original contributions to the history of the American antislavery movement, and antislavery thought more broadly," *Beacons of Liberty* shows that different free-soil havens, such as Sierra Leone, Upper Canada, Haiti, and Mexico each offered distinct possibilities for freedom in Black Americans' collective consciousness while providing "practical models of Black freedom" as well as destinations for emigrants.

Martin R. Delaney endorsed emigration as a means to achieve Black liberation, though Tunde Adeleke shows Delaney's political thought was more complex and dynamic than is often assumed. *In the Service of God and Humanity: Conscience, Reason, and the Mind of Martin R. Delany*, Adeleke's most recent analysis of the activist, shows that Delaney was alternatively a separatist, integrationist, militarist, and accommodationist before returning to his previous belief in emigration. Despite his changing methods, a belief in the power of moral suasion animated all of Delaney's emancipationist efforts. This constant belief puzzled reviewer Philip Yaure. However, his puzzlement, Yaure believes, is indicative of "the success of Adeleke's project."

Like Adeleke, Anna Mae Duane ultimately shows how diverse the emancipatory goals and methods were among nineteenth-century African Americans in *Educated for Freedom: The Incredible Story of Two Fugitive Schoolboys Who Grew up to Change a Nation*. Duane traces the lives of James McCune Smith and Henry Highland Garnet, both born into slavery, and both graduates of the New York African Free School, to show that despite their common background,

they both approached Black liberation in divergent ways. Reviewer Jane E. Dabel found Duane's book to be "a valuable contribution to the history of African American abolitionists," especially her exploration of the diversity within the movement. Smith argued African Americans should pursue racial uplift in America while Garnet insisted emigration was the most likely avenue for Black peoples' emancipatory success.

Garnet endorsed emigration at the Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, which was part of the Colored Conventions Movement, a vibrant collective effort that spanned across the Nineteenth Century and across the United States. *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, a product of the groundbreaking, collaborative work of the Colored Convention Project (CCP), investigates the movement through a series of essays edited by Gabrielle P. Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson. The book couples its analysis with open-access primary sources offered by the CCP as well as resources for educators. Reviewer Samantha De Vera argues the sixteen essays, in concert with the book's "digital components . . . is a unique and inventive contribution to the field of digital humanities and the current scholarship on the long nineteenth century." Replete with metahistorical analysis, before untold stories, and correctives, *The Colored Conventions Movement* gives insight into how these conventions reflected and shaped Black political consciousness and illustrates the fact that emancipation activism was led by Black Americans while white allies followed.

Kate Masur similarly shows that Black Americans were at the forefront of emancipation activism in the Nineteenth Century in *Until Justice Be Done: America's First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction*. Masur contends historians have overlooked a decades'-long, Black-led civil rights movement that flourished in the nineteenth century. Reviewer Ben Davidson situates Masur's claim alongside recent scholarship that emphasizes "echoes, resonances, and repetition in United States history." The movement's fights, Masur shows, often boiled down to the strain between state and federal governments and citizenships within the two polities: White people often argued states had the right to police its population in the name of public safety and Black Americans insisted on equal protection under the law, a language that presaged the Fourteenth Amendment. In Davidson's estimation, "*Until Justice Be Done* is necessary reading for any scholar of U.S. history," and is a book he hopes "will receive a wide readership beyond academia," as Masur's "non-polemical" examination of citizenship

rights “may well challenge those of various political stripes to reexamine their idea and strategies for honoring, changing, or using the Constitution.”

Damon Root examines Frederick Douglass’s attitudes toward the U.S. Constitution in *A Glorious Liberty: Frederick Douglass and the Fight for an Antislavery Constitution*. Reviewer Leigh Fought writes that, had the book been published “fifty or even forty years ago” it “might have been hailed as an interesting take on an important African American of the antebellum era.” However, Fought contends Root’s goal is to portray Douglass as a stout constitutionalist and classical liberal in the mold of Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and Lincoln. Root’s lack of secondary citations and the paucity of Douglass’s own words in his book is, Fought believes, purposeful in that Root has ignored the literature that depicts Douglass as a complex figure in an effort to flatten his subject. Fought worries Root, an editor for “right-leaning and libertarian-tinged” *Reason*, is ideologically driven rather than interested in what Douglass actually believed about the constitution. This, Fought concludes, “is just bad history” regardless of one’s “political tendencies.”

Bad history is a problem we historians must all confront today. As I type, reactionary white Americans are assaulting the study of America’s history of white supremacy, and by extension, the history of Black Americans’ activism against it. These reactionary efforts, however, are nothing new. In fact, their antecedents date back to at least the tail end of the Civil War era when leaders as well as rank-and-file members of the Lost Cause Movement attempted to obscure the truth about the Old South and the Confederacy’s attempts to preserve it.

As the Nineteenth Century turned to the Twentieth, Confederate memorial organizations, most notably the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), disseminated a warped history of the Civil War and a romanticized portrayal of the Old South. This was part of the UDC’s goal of turning the South’s white children into “living monuments” to the Confederacy and its cause. To that end, they forced schools to use textbooks that explained that the seceding states were right to leave the Union, and that they did so *not* to protect slavery, but to protect their states’ rights, the Constitution, and the Old South’s supposedly superior society. Women in the UDC wrote essays that portrayed the Old South as a white fantasy in which happy-go-lucky slaves sang as they picked cotton for their benevolent masters. UDC members installed their diatribes disguised as essays as supplements to official textbooks. Mississippi school children were given UDC member Laura Martin Rose’s

The Ku Klux Klan or Invisible Empire to read alongside their history textbooks. The first thing Mississippi students read when they cracked Rose's book was its dedication: "This book is dedicated by the author to the Youth of the Southland, hoping that a perusal of its pages will inspire them with respect and admiration for the Confederate soldiers, who were the real Ku Klux, and whose deeds of courage and valor, have never been surpassed, and rarely equalled [sic], in the annals of history." The goal of such books was to demonstrate that the South's race relations were better under the plantation system or when the KKK terrorized the South's Black citizens.¹ This topsy-turvy interpretation of the Old South, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction era was, at the very least, an attempt to raise doubt about the advances Black Americans had made after emancipation, and perhaps to inspire students to revert them when they reached maturity.²

The UCV's and UDC's efforts to shape young Americans' understanding of the past to fit within their ideologically conservative parameters resonates with the Trump Administration's attempts to do the same through its 1776 commission. This panel of non-historian historians and conservative ideologues insisted it was incumbent for American schools to return to a "patriotic education that teaches the truth about America." Though the "truth about America" they intended schools to perpetuate did not ignore slavery, it perversely claimed in-depth discussion of the country's racist past was itself a form of racism.³

The Lost Cause, the 1776 Commission, and modern-day conservative activists also directed their ire at college campuses and academic historians. In the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, the practice of history transitioned from a hobby to a profession, and a new generation of southern academic historians insisted on advancing a more accurate account of the region's past. These "scientific" historians chided the "sentimentality" that ran through the memorial

¹ Consult Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), especially chapters nine and thirteen; and Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), especially chapters six and seven. Cox discusses Rose's book on page 99, and the UDC's efforts to create "living monuments" on page 120. The dedication quote comes from Laura Martin Rose, *Ku-Klux Klan, or Invisible Empire* (New Orleans: Graham Co., 1914), 1.

² Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (Oxford University Press, 1987), especially chapters nine and thirteen; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (University Press of Florida, 2003), especially chapters six and seven.

³ The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, "The 1776 Report," 16, 18.

organizations' portrayals of the Old South and Confederacy. Southern hospitality turned to southern pugnacity when these scholars approached the truth in their works.

Some Trustees at The University of the South likely attempted to remove Professor William P. Trent. This came after Trent wrote a critical biography of antebellum southern literary giant and proslavery polemicist, William Gilmore Simms, in which Trent also argued slavery was a “barbarous institution,” and the Confederate Cause represented a countercurrent to progress. Trent's story is further illustrative of the chastising and censoring power of counter-historical conservatism. In an attempt to make peace with his enemies, Trent wrote a biography of Robert E. Lee in which he concluded there had been “no character in all history that combines power and virtue and charm” as in the person of Robert E. Lee. Despite his effort to redeem his reputation through valorizing Lee, Trent ultimately found his native South so inhospitable that he left it behind. Other southern historians, such as John Spencer Bassett and William E. Dodd, learned the same lesson and skedaddled out of Dixie. Those that stayed in the former Confederate states rarely incurred the ire of Confederate stalwarts because they too often celebrated the Confederacy and its cause.⁴

In an episode that resonates with the University of the South's treatment of William P. Trent, the University of North Carolina's Board of Trustees has recently refused to extend tenure to journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones despite the journalism school's determination to grant her that privilege and the academic freedom it brings. Reporting indicates their decision was inspired, at least in part, by a white alumnus who donated over \$25 million to UNC and who specifically cited the *1619 Project*, and its claim that Black Americans largely fought for their rights alone, as the root of his objection to her appointment. He insisted he was simply siding with historians, though Hannah-Jones's interpretation of Black liberation activism hews closely to the conclusions of the historians reviewed in this issue. The 1776 commission insists college campuses are “hotbeds of anti-Americanism, libel, and censorship” that endeavor to cultivate “at the very least disdain and at worst outright hatred for his country.” Republican-dominated state governments across the United States are currently introducing and passing legislation that would limit educators' ability to teach students about America's past and present problems with white supremacy. Oklahoma legislators recently passed Bill 1775, which makes it illegal to teach the state's students about race and racism. This is not a theoretical problem as the law has caused

⁴ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 181, 183, 185.

the cancellation of at least one community college class dedicated to teaching about race and racism in America.⁵

Though there are parallels between the Lost Cause's miseducation, the 1776 Commission's attempts to reformulate American history, and state governments' attacks on academic freedom, the current conservative assault on history bears the weight of the government's endorsement and even government mandate. In a sense, modern-day efforts to stifle the truth about America's racist heritage are more threatening than those the UCV and UDC carried out at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Only time will tell if these efforts to mask the truth will be as successful as the Lost Cause Movement was. Regardless, we historians of the Civil War Era, whether we all accept the challenge or not, are engaged in a battle over what future generations will learn about antebellum America, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. May we continue the work done by the scholars whose brilliant books are reviewed in this issue, and may we stem the tide of anti-historical efforts that confront us today.

Sincerely,

Jeffery Hardin Hobson, Editor

⁵ Sanjana Karanth, "Major Donor Lobbied Against UNC Hiring Nikole Hannah-Jones Over '1619 Project,'" *Huffington Post*, May 30, 2021; The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, "The 1776 Report," 18; Hannah Knowles, "Critical Race Theory Ban Leads Oklahoma College to Cancel Class that Taught 'White Privilege,'" *Washington Post*, May 29, 2021.